

Elsevier, the Research Works Act and Open Access: where to now?

by Blog Admin

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Elsevier may have hushed the blogosphere when it dropped its support for the Research Works Act but [Stephen Curry](#) doesn't see the issue of open access fading into the background. He explains why he hesitated to write for an Elsevier journal and warns researchers of the need to be wary of fragmentation of literature into institutional repositories.

This post was originally published on Stephen Curry's personal blog [Reciprocal Space](#).



If Elsevier calculated that its withdrawal of support for the Research Works Act (RWA) would neutralise the arguments stirred up around academic publishing, I think the company is mistaken. I certainly hope so.

Things may have gone a little quiet on this issue in the blogosphere since the removal of the immediate cause of irritation, but there remain good reasons to keep looking hard at the vexed state of academic publishing, in particular at the issue of open access, and to keep thinking about how things might be improved.

I'm sure I am not the only one who has had his eyes opened by this affair. Though I haven't written on the topic for a couple of weeks, I have still been engaged with it. As a working scientist, the issue of publishing just keeps cropping up. Having been made aware of the problems — and some of the associated complexities — I want to try to get to the end of my thought processes, however convoluted the journey.

The past

Elsevier abandoned support for the RWA at the end of February but did so [rather grudgingly](#). There was little [acknowledgement](#) of the boycott and so the withdrawal struck [many commentators](#) as a tactical retreat by a company that had little notion of enacting real change.

Elsevier's move may have cooled the argument a little but it is by no means dead. For one thing the number of signatories of the [Cost of Knowledge petition](#) has continued to rise — at the time of writing it stands at over 8200. I suspect the embers of the argument are being kept warm by discussions in common rooms and offices around the country. The publisher's support for the RWA has had something of akin to the [Streisand effect](#): I'm sure more people than ever are aware of open access and thinking more clearly about what it means for them.

The present

I find myself thinking differently. It would be an exaggeration to say I had been *radicalised* but my determination to seek out open access avenues in publishing my work is stronger than ever. To give just one example, I was invited a week or so ago to contribute an article to a special review issue being put together by an Elsevier journal. I was pleased to be asked — such invitations are a nice acknowledgement of your expertise — and normally I would have agreed without hesitation.

But this time I paused for thought. As is common in such situations, I would be expected to write the review without payment but now I asked myself why I should contribute to Elsevier's very hefty profit margins by writing for free an article that would be held behind a paywall. So I replied to the editor to say I would only accept the invitation if Elsevier agreed to make the resulting review article freely available. I added that I would consider my labour as payment of any 'author processing charge'. Unfortunately, we were not able to come to terms so I will not be contributing. Three months ago the outcome of this invitation would have

been different.

The decision in this case was relatively straight-forward. This would have been a single-author paper since none of my present group is working in the subject area of the review. It would have been a more difficult choice had there been scope to involve other members of the group — I have their careers to consider. Nevertheless, I think that in future I shall always test the open access options before considering invitations to write reviews.

The future

The issue of open access should remain prominent over the coming months. In the UK the topic will get a fresh airing when the government's [Finch committee](#), set up last year to examine open access, reports later this Spring.

Independently, the UK research councils (RCUK) are reviewing their open access policies and just last week published [draft proposals](#) (PDF – have a look, it's only 6 sides). While these new proposals don't go as far as the open access policy of the [Wellcome Trust](#), they represent significant movement in the right direction. The key changes from the current stance are:

- *Specifically stating that Open Access includes unrestricted use of manual and automated text and data mining tools; and unrestricted reuse of content with proper attribution.*
- *Requiring publication in journals that meet Research Council 'standards' for Open Access.*
- *No support for publisher embargoes of longer than six months from the date of publication*

There's a nice summary of the draft document on the [Nature News blog](#) and an initial critique [here](#).

In the proposals support remains for the hybrid model, allowing either Gold open access, where authors pay 'author processing charges' and the publisher makes the final formatted version freely available immediately, or Green open access where an author-formatted version of the paper is provided free via 'subject-based or institutional repositories'.

There are residual problems with the proposals that I hope can be cleared up in the consultation period before the new RCUK policy is set in stone. Firstly, the draft proposals retain the dual funding model for payment of open access charges — they can be charged directly to the grant if publication is within its lifetime or from indirect costs (overheads) paid to the host institution. As I have written [already](#), this complex system *does not work in practice*. It will take good will and organisation on the part of universities and funders to enact a system that provides proper support. If this is to involve negotiations with each institution, it would appear to undercut RCUK's aim to find 'more efficient and effective mechanisms to support Open Access'.

The second major problem is likely to be agreeing what constitutes an allowable repository for those authors trying to go down the Green open access route (which has the advantage of not incurring any charges). I ran into difficulty on this route with a recent [paper](#) (published in *Structure*, an Elsevier title) because the staff running my institutional repository at first thought that my agreement with Elsevier did *not* allow me to deposit the full text of the paper. Happily, an email to the publisher resolved the problem within a few days (please have a [read](#)), but I was left wondering how many other articles have not appeared in institutional repositories because of similar misunderstandings (to say nothing of institutional or authorial lethargy over deposition).

A subject-based repository would have been a far preferable option since it makes papers easier to find. However, I discovered that my publishing agreement with Elsevier explicitly restricted me to my institution's repository. I was debarred from sending my version of the paper to [UK PubMed Central](#).

This regulation hinders access to the literature and therefore undermines the whole purpose of open access. [PubMed](#), the first port of call for anyone searching the biomedical literature, frequently links to publisher's site but never to institutional repositories. An avid reader seeking out my recent paper would

easily be [directed](#) to the journal site where, without the benefit of a subscription, they would have to pay Elsevier's \$31.50 charge for 24 hours access (not even for a permanent copy!). Alternatively, the poor reader would have to guess that there *might* be a copy at Imperial and would then have to try to find our [repository](#).

I hope it is obvious that fragmentation of the literature into institutional repositories cannot be a desirable long-term solution to open access. I would urge RCUK to look closely at this aspect of their draft policy and to push as hard as possible for subject-based repositories.

I'll stop there. I'm sorry to harp on about this and have already gone on at length. But needs must.

Update: There is a report of the [negative reaction](#) of the Publishers' Association to the RCUK draft proposals in the Times Higher Education — hat-tip to Prof. Martin Humphries at Manchester University ([@HumphriesPrsnl](#)). This is to me a good sign that RCUK is pushing in the right direction.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics

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